

# **News** *from Assemblymember* *Joe Coto*

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## **Tribes Applaud Signing of AB 544 (Coto) to Preserve Indian Languages**

SACRAMENTO, CA – October 22, 2009 – Assembly Bill 544, authored by Assembly Member Joe Coto, was signed by Governor Schwarzenegger last week. Specifically, AB 544 will allow tribes to develop criteria for language fluency and other qualifications for awarding a special ***American Indian Languages Credential***. “When AB 544 was introduced earlier this year in the California State Legislature, many California tribes showed wholehearted and immediate support,” said Assembly Member Coto. “We are pleased that the Governor signed this important bill into law.”

One of the tribes that stood behind the bill from the beginning was the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians, a tribe whose reservation is located in Santa Barbara County. “We have had the opportunity to revitalize our language, but other tribes may not be as fortunate – many California Indian languages are on the brink of extinction,” said Vincent Armenta, Tribal Chairman of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians. “AB 544 promises to assist the efforts of tribes to get the most qualified teachers of their languages and cultures into the classroom. We were proud to support this legislation.”

Once one of the most linguistically diverse places in the world, with some 100 different indigenous languages, California is now seeing the last native speakers passing away. Half of the languages are already extinct (or “sleeping,” as many prefer to say, since it has been shown that even languages with no speakers can be revitalized if there is sufficient linguistic documentation).

Almost all of the 50 languages that still have speakers have only a handful of elders who learned their language at home from their parents. Unlike immigrant languages, which still exist in other countries even if an immigrant family leaves their ancestral language behind, American Indian languages exist only in America. “Those communities that have been able to establish indigenous language classes in the local schools have had to overcome many obstacles, not the least of which is the problem of teacher certification,” said Assembly Member Coto. “AB 544 will allow tribes to develop criteria for language fluency and other qualifications for awarding a special ***American Indian Languages Credential***.”

AB 544 goes into effect on January 1, 2010. Tribes have already started working on their testing instruments for oral and written fluency in their respective Native American languages. Tribes will then need to determine which candidates pass their tests and provide such information to California Commission on Teaching Credentialing.

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